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**From Service Relationship to service encounters: the desirable
integration of professional dynamics**
*the case of implementing the Bus Attitude within the RATP Bus
Inspection Service (Contrôle Service Bus)*

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From Service Relationship to service encounters: the desirable integration of professional dynamics

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Abstract

Starting from a case study on the implementation of the Bus Attitude, a service project within RATP, the purpose of which is to establish a genuine service relationship onboard Paris buses, we attempt to question the operational implementation challenges encountered by management, especially as for the human resources ones, even though the project seemed to have been prepared adequately.

We propose referring to the Abbott conceptual framework to account for these challenges which seem to reflect more than just a “reluctance to change”. The conceptual framework, which emphasises the systematic observation of how so-called professional groups address an issue according to a certain understanding, allows outlining a certain number of shortcomings and ambiguities, in particular in the way those groups consider themselves legitimate and efficient in their answer to the problem in question.

We then consider how these specific results can be generalised and help to move forward in debates relating to service relationship: those relating to the specification of service relationship on the one hand and on the other hand, those that emerge from the organisation of contact staff activity. This progress seems to be a token of a less fragmented approach to services, which would call for a more operational use of this approach by professional dynamics.

Key words

Service encounter; implementation; human resources; profession; professional dynamics.

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1. Introduction

Since 1994, when Eiglier and Langeard denounced the wide discrepancy between theory and practice (Eiglier & Langeard, 1994) as regards service relationship, the situation does not seem to have evolved significantly. Naturally, it is not for us to voice an opinion on a global situation. Instead, we would like to present a specific case, on which to build a study on the operational implementation of service relationship projects.

The case in question is that of the implementation of the Bus Attitude (BA) project, as it concerned inspection staff from Contrôle Service Bus (CSB). The BA was meant to “restore a true service relationship on [RATP] lines”, and in that sense it seems particularly relevant to address the issue of the operational implementation of services, particularly regarding the decisive aspects of human resources (Grover, 1987).

To start with, we will briefly present: first, the genesis of the project, including both practical implementations and a relatively old study, and secondly, the challenges that the project faced and which restricted the success of the BA, at least over the observation period. We will then try to better analyse management challenges by referring to the conceptual framework by sociologist of professions Andrew Abbot (Abbott, 1988). It will then be a matter of connecting empirical elements with the main aspects of the Abbott model, the professions system.

This way, we intend to emphasise the contribution of such a model in catching the existing professional dynamics. We believe these dynamics are key elements in implementing a service project. They are an important aspect of services management, at any rate liable to help to better understand service relationships in practice.

2. The BA: towards a "new service relationship" on board Paris buses?

a. The genesis of the BA

Referring to the BA genesis, if only briefly, is far from being pointless, if only to show how the BA is not a project that started from scratch with no previous background or initial development. In the interest of time, we will present a simplified genesis of the BA, distinguishing the development of the concept on the one hand, and the practical implementations that preceded and partly prepared it on the other hand.

Maturing the concept

The BA is partly the result of a long thought by RATP on its relationship with customers centred on the issue of service relationship. In public services, this reflection is not new and is more often characterised by a strategic belief than by actual implementations, service relationship then being mostly a slogan, to the point of sometimes losing all meaning (Weller, 1998).

RATP took part in this movement of public service introspection, in a context where the bureaucratic model and the quality of service delivered were being challenged. It actually gave the impulse in the early 1990s by organising seminars on how to clarify the scope of the concept.

Thus an exploration of service relationship was launched on established conceptual grounds, which was not limited to seminars but progressively spread inside the company. The service relationship issue was becoming unavoidable. The creation of a Service Relationship unit within the Sales Department, together with the introduction of PR slogans such as “New Service Relationship” or “careful service” were some of its strong symptoms.

It also makes sense to recall the evolution of the RATP strategic context, which probably contributed greatly to the concept of service relationship taking root. The questions of competition (in particular the opening up to Europe) and of transport operator payment are the main factors of the change in the strategic context.

On the one hand, this recurring threat of opening up to competition leads to progressively

introducing a market-based mindset which puts “customer” satisfaction as the top strategic objective of the company. From this point of view, paying attention to service relationship means accepting that most of the satisfaction occurs face-to-face. Whilst quality of service is imperative, one should not forget that this quality is reached mostly face-to-face (Borzeix, 1991), and subsequently a truly “caring” service should be implemented.

On the other hand, over the years, RATP regulating authorities have considered the option of indexing the payment of transport operators on the number of travellers who validate their tickets and no longer on the number of estimated travellers. The behaviour of travellers in a fare evasion situation becomes a true sword of Damocles, in particular on the bus network where fraud reaches some 15% and where “validation” habits are, to say the least, loosely rooted. Structuring the service relationship means trying to move away from a free access transport system, which no longer allows it to fully secure transport operators’ income. Here we can see that the BA is not just a passing trend but on the contrary that it addresses genuine strategic corporate issues.

Actual implementations

In our opinion, the BA cannot be treated separately from the set of experiments which shaped it to a certain extent. In particular, one can highlight the importance of the New Tram Service (Nouveau Service Tram) and of the Bus Line Service (Service De Ligne). Each of these services strived to draw on the consequences of the strategic context evolution by building on the lessons learnt from service relationship.

For one selected line, this is about organising small-scale teams that will emphasise relationship, being at customers’ service and on these occasions remind customers of usage rules. This is about being both “in charge” and “welcoming”.

Mentioning those experiments if only briefly is important. Indeed, their success and the way they demonstrated the possible practical implementation of strategic principles allow the BA to build on actual experience. Many actors connect the BA and those experiments.

b. The challenges of implementing the BA

What we have just covered highlights the maturing of the BA. We need to defuse the basic criticism consisting in saying that the BA was designed in an office environment, away from

field reality and with no real expectations from RATP - in essence a communication project around a slogan pushing “courtesy” and “conviviality”.

On the contrary, besides being part of a long-term project, the BA was built in stages, including in particular the joint definition of usage rules on board buses between drivers and travellers and also the experiment of the BA prior to rollout in all other sectors.

The idea is quite clear: the BA as a service project was not set up in a hurry. For all that, the following lines are meant to emphasise the number of challenges which we witnessed, regarding the implementation of the BA by a given category of staff, namely CSB inspectors (Suquet, 2005).

Inspectors were among those concerned with the implementation of the BA insofar as as field staff members they significantly contributed to drivers changing to becoming “in charge on board” again and also in setting up a true service relationship. They acted in small-scale bus line teams emphasising “customer greeting”, conviviality and compliance with usage rules...

The contribution of CSB to the BA was significant. This is actually what helped to identify the issues brought by the BA, insofar as staff had renamed the project “bus lassitude” (bus weariness). As generalisation went forward, the rejection of the BA by CSB staff was getting increasingly obvious and visible. Management identified the issue as stemming from reluctance to cultural change.

There are actually many reasons for considering reluctance to change, among which the tradition of management sciences which thrived on this topic with many theories. But for all that, we did not go this way, thus deliberately setting aside the opposition stemming from the relationship with trade unions, nor did we follow management sciences’ conventional analyses considering that management were already familiar with them.

Also, what we witnessed with CSB was not an opposition to change as such insofar as the observation of staff at work usually suggested a desire to do their work properly. CSB staff we met were usually keen to be active and were dedicated to their work.

BA seemed to cause concern for those staff, not because they attempted to establish different standards – this would amount to “conventional” reluctance to change as suggested in the studies by Lewin (Lewin, 1951, quoted in Alexandre-Bailly et al, 2003). On the contrary, what characterised the results of those observations was the fact that CSB staff did not feel they were doing anything when on the field with the Bus Attitude although their

tasks were defined in detail and customer surveys showed that on the whole the customers were satisfied.

Our starting point was this issue, and we addressed it using Abbott's conceptual framework, which is particularly suited to providing explanations to what we observed. We will now present it briefly before showing how its application has been enlightening.

3. The contribution of the "system of professions" model to the setting the problem of implementing the BA within the CSB

c. The system of professions model

Abbott is a sociologist of professions who proposed a general framework for interpreting professionalisation phenomena (Abbott, 1988). For this purpose, he develops a system to which those few lines cannot do justice: the objective here is first of all to give awareness to the essential principles that characterise his approach.

Starting from a problem

For Abbott, a profession can be comprehended only if it can relate to an issue, insofar as its *raison d'être* lies in addressing an issue (alcoholism for example). So, identifying a professional group means pointing to an issue and to the solution it brings to it.

He suggests distinguishing between the objective and subjective aspects of an issue. The objective aspect (for instance, an addiction to alcohol), which can be assessed physically and which seems unquestionable, is that about which there is a consensus as to the need to address the issue.

Subjective aspects, on the other hand, come under the interpretation by a specific group (for instance addiction to alcohol can boil down to religious, moral or physiological issues).

“Subjective” should not be understood as the interpretation of the problem by the professional group being arbitrary, but simply that it can be challenged by other interpretations of the same problem (in its subjective aspect).

According to Abbott, the whole work of a professional group is precisely to provide a

strong legitimacy to its interpretation, which can no longer be challenged by others and that its subjective status becomes insensitive (we can for instance take the example of the struggle between the various types of medicine, and look at the largely dominant part acquired by current hospital medicine).

Starting from the subjective aspects of the problem and based on those, we can highlight a system of professional groups, all of which relate to an objective problem and all of which claim to solve the problem through a specific subjective understanding. According to Abbott, this evolution of the system should be paid attention, not focusing on one specific group.

Stabilising answers: diagnosis / inferring / treatment sequences

A professional group relates to an objective aspect of a given problem. The answer it can provide (in its efficiency and its specificity) comes from a three-step reasoning process (diagnosis / inferring / treatment sequences).

The diagnosis consists in examining the case, deriving information from it, and then combining it so as to bring the current case down to a well known case. In the more simple cases, the treatment to administer (prescription) is linked directly to the expressed diagnosis. The treatment and the diagnosis correspond to a whole classification system specific to the professional group, and which is part for its expertise in the issue.

Sometimes however, more complex cases require inferring. It is the balance between the routine management of a number of cases (without inferring) and resorting to inference in other cases that ensures the legitimacy of a professional group. This way, according to Abbott, one can say that a professional group must be able to standardise its routine work whilst keeping its ability to innovate, if it is to keep its preferred status with respect to other professional groups.

It should be noted that these routine practices translate otherwise than by abstract reasoning. On the contrary, “routinisation” occurs through diagnosis - inferring - treatment in work groups, which can be characterised both through specific tools and activities. Moving to this type of description allows not to remain at the same reasoning description level as Abbott, which is not enough in the case being studied as staff do not as such formalise a reasoning to solve a problem but act within the framework of an activity targeted towards a given production goal.

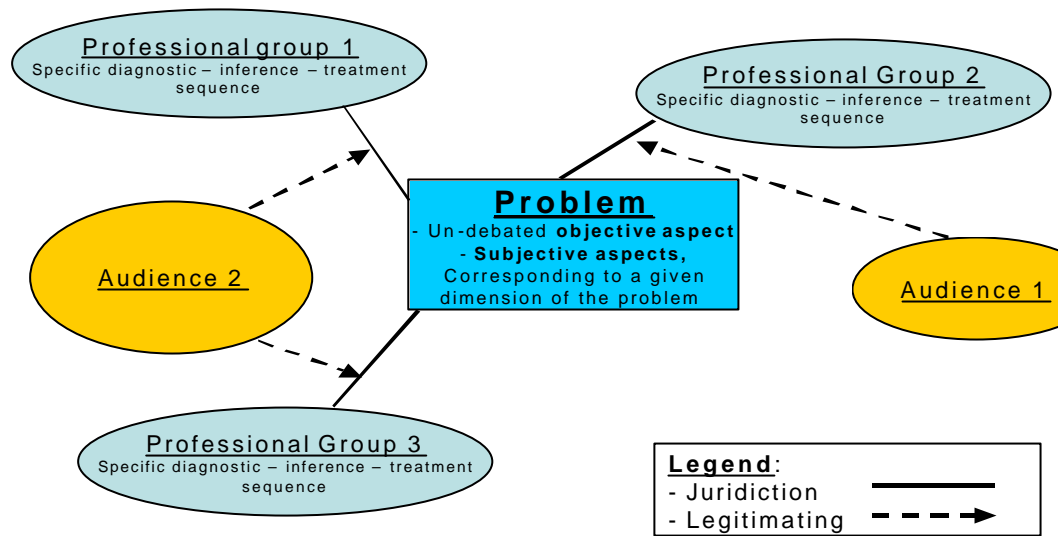
Putting it differently, it seems important to emphasise the activity and tool side, which is better suited to implement the diagnosis - inferring – treatment sequence in staff's actual work.

Towards a monopoly? Jurisdiction, formalising knowledge and the part played by audiences

According to the Abbott conceptual framework, the goal of professional groups is to establish monopolies. To a certain extent, they aim at being the only professional group capable of addressing a given subjective problem. This is what Abbott calls holding a jurisdiction on an issue. One means used commonly by professional groups to stabilise a jurisdiction is to formalise their expertise officially (the diagnosis - inferring – treatment sequence), preferably at an academic level: this is the ultimate level of professional groups, which is to be found in psychiatry for instance.

But many groups cannot claim such expressions of their professionalism and their expertise remains mostly informal. It is important to stress that the professional recognition of a group does not depend on the formalisation level of their expertise only, although this can often be a decisive factor.

Another process is involved in professionalizing, which of course relates to how groups formalise their expertise but cannot be limited to it, namely the part played by audiences. For Abbott, audiences are groups of people external to the professional group system but which care about the solution brought to the problem in question. Audiences are essential in determining the attribution of jurisdictions insofar as competing groups need an external principle to legitimate the “winner”. More often than not, the state plays a leading part (by



deciding what types of care will be refunded, following up on the health care example).

Figure representing the professions system model (adapted from Abbott)

d. The ambiguity of the problem addressed by the BA

As we emphasised, usually the very content of the BA activity is questioned by staff. In the conceptual framework being presented, the contents of the activity of a group can be questioned with respect to the correspondence between this group and the subjective aspect of a problem to be dealt with.

This allows to quickly point to the pending ambiguity of the BA, *in particular when it dealt with CSB staff*. Indeed, given its ambition, the BA assumed many goals among which:

- 1 conviviality and tranquillity (mood and quality objectives);
- 2 service relationship and caring service (quality of service objective)
- 3 the increase in income and the decrease in fraud (financial and commercial objectives)
- 4 courtesy and usage compliance rules (behaviour regulation objectives).

The variety of tasks illustrates the challenges in defining and in interpreting the project. It seems unavoidable for project interpretations to have been varied and sometimes conflicting,

not to mention their evolution over time or the opportunity to emphasise one aspect more than another. Consequently, it seems difficult to highlight clearly and collectively the issue the BA was supposed to address.

CSB staff actually believed their purpose was to bring an answer to the issue of fraud. Their objective has traditionally been to inspect travellers and to fine those who committed offences. This paper is not the place to describe in detail the history of the evolution of inspectors' work, but in any event, traditionally, CSB was clearly in charge of a "repressive" approach to fraud which corresponded to a specific subjective understanding.

From then on, we could note staff's unusual difficulty in understanding what carrying out the BA meant, that is to say how the BA translates in terms of action plan. Indeed, they tended to interpret the BA by seeing how it could fit in the environment of fraud-fighting professions. But as the BA was not expressed directly and only in terms of a fraud-prevention project, fitting it within the system was an issue.

Management not taking account of CSB staff specificity during the roll-out of the BA was a cause for concern as it appeared that the BA was poorly positioned, at any rate in the CSB staff's own referential. From then on, understanding the action initiated by the BA was not easy and many agents came to the conclusion that the BA was pointless as it was not presented as providing an answer to a specific problem.

e. The issue of answers

This difficulty for CSB staff to comprehend the BA can be analysed further by pointing to the other elements from the Abbott conceptual framework dealing with answers, that is to say, stabilisation on the one hand and acknowledging reasoning sequences related to the issue on the other hand.

A first questioning points to the rules of the BA in that they testify to the "treatment" given to the issue. The Bus Attitude operation "rules" were challenged indeed by the actual issue of fraud, in particular regarding offence reporting.

Indeed, the question of reporting offenders has long been debated within teams as CSB staff wondered about the ability to report as part of the BA. That is to say, they wondered both about the endorsement by management and about the actual means of conducting reporting. Also, the BA did not turn out to convince staff, as for the other problems concerned by this

project. In particular, mood objectives translated into strong communication on standard situations, such as that of the “grand-mother” about which agents were asked to contribute to the careful service by helping her to lift up her bag. This sort of example was not convincing, a feeling staff expressed while being trained, insofar as whilst it could perfectly fill a conceptual space and was a paradigm for careful service, it was more difficult to pretend that the situation occurred often enough to justify keeping a whole team busy... Thus, staff did not really see how the answers provided by the BA were relevant and credible. Besides, they did not feel that their audience (in that instance, management and travellers) considered their activity to be legitimate. On the one hand, management did not communicate extensively on the quantified results of staff activities although it could have actually provided visibility and hence a start to actual existence. This is all the more detrimental as indicators existed and could have been used to help to drive the project. On the other hand, although travellers expressed an overall satisfaction of the BA in surveys, they did not spontaneously express their gratitude to staff members. Therefore, as part of their business, staff sometimes felt rather useless, as they were reluctant to remain “idle” while they were seen by travellers. There again, analysing the situation in the conceptual framework of the system of professions might have led to management taking account of this issue better, insofar as satisfaction measurements existed but were seldom brought to staff’s attention.

This way, we feel we have shown how this corporate project was put into perspective and revisited as part of a system related to the issue of fraud. The introduction of the Bus Attitude and the implication it exacted from staff induced a disruption in the system of activities as the project played a part that put it in competition (as a time-consuming production activity) with other activities that were already considered legitimate. The absence of credible and legitimate answer did not allow to fit the project in another activity system either, regarding the other objectives of the BA.

We also believe we showed how the Abbott conceptual framework allowed to bring a relevant understanding to BA challenges. This analytic approach appears to us to be capable of emphasising what we now call under the syntagm of “professional dynamics”.

We consider that, despite the cultural implication connected to the notion of profession, professional dynamics do not only concern doctors or lawyers, but actually any organisation can benefit from taking them into account (Bureau & Suquet, 2005). We will endeavour to

show how services represent a relevant sector for such analyses, in particular if one focuses on their operational implementation.

4. Professional dynamics: an important element in the operational implementation of services

In our opinion, the professional dynamics approach is a twofold contribution to the debate on the operational implementation of services. One deals more specifically with the specification of service relationship. The other one focuses on the work of contact staff. We will elaborate on both in turn.

f. The requirement of specification of service relationship

In its special issue dedicated to service relationship, *Economies et Sociétés* (*Economies et Sociétés* 3:6, 2001) meant to launch again the debate on service relationship. Nicole May (May, 2001) went back to the issue of the debate getting bogged down around confusions unlikely to make the reflection go forward, or for that matter to implement quality services. According to her, the very success of the notion of service relationship actually harms it:

“The very significant development of this notion in France over the last years has come together with a kind of substantialisation of this notion: one talks of service relationship as of a defined entity, existing as such in the real world, as if, beyond the variety of situations and of the object of analyses to which this notion points (...) there was a unique substance, an essence of service relationship which would not be challenged by the diversity of its actual expressions.” (May, 2001)

It seems to us indeed, following up on May that service relationship calls for less generality, failing which all operational reach might be lost. This is actually the project from the Goffman model (Goffman, 1968). The latter does not intend to define a strategic goal, but rather to provide a framework for analysing relations occurring while connecting a service provider with a customer and a complex system needing mending. Although this model can be debated and extended, the initiative sets a reference example.

The confusion is easy and comfortable between a strategic objective that materialises a

notion like service relationship (and the BA was no exception) and the interrogation on the concrete expression of the various service relationships that occur for staff. On this account, the professional dynamics approach seems beneficial to us in that it forces to take the “reparation” issue seriously (Goffman, *ibid.*).

We saw how bringing out a problem, in its subjective aspect, was decisive, as was its association with a stabilised answer. This was one of the BA’s shortcomings. Yet, service relationship is too often designed as intransitive. That is actually totally consistent with its use for formulating a strategy. But this is about “being at the customers’ service”, which is different.

We believe that taking care of identifying existing objective problems accurately and the subjective aspects of those problems (whether or not they exist), allows to envisage staff action not only on a credible but also on a sound basis. Judging by the Goffman model, this is a way of specifying the reparation which is the occasion for any service relationship. It is all the more to the point since it can help reducing role ambiguity for employees, whose negative effects Hartline and Ferrell have outlined (Hartline and Ferrell, 1996).

This is not about denying all possible existence to other types of relation than that accounted for by Goffman but rather to display exactness in the use of concepts, which are often half-applied. From this standpoint, professional dynamics are a relatively simple tool for management which can help in elaborating on and specifying the strategic requirements down to the level of staff activity.

g. Contributing to preparing contact staff activity

We saw that the main issue in implementing the BA was that of applying strategic principles down to the level of staff activity. Here, we just point to a phenomenon that affects all services more generally as outlined by Pascal Ughetto:

“Service relationship is liable to serve as an example, not in the sense where it would represent a kind of formula to be replicated, but where it would put at stake the connections between the various dimensions of work. It does not impose itself on players with no alternative; it frequently appears as a possible strategic positioning with respect to which one has to relate. From the moment one states its adoption, questions come up on choices relating to production and work in various areas. (...) At an operational level, these requirements translate through the way management handles it in its day to day management. Yet, at this level, it

is most striking to see to what extent management is ill-prepared to get the principles turned into facts which could turn the activity towards a new work model.” (Ughetto & al, 2002)

Indeed, service relationship brings along a world of questions on the work of contact employees. The “servuction model” (Eiglier & Leangeard, 1988) points to the decisive part played by contact agents in the production of service, as one of the three elements that are part of the enterprise. Research carried out on service relationship delved into their role, their competence and their challenges (Jeannot & Joseph, 1995). For all that, they remain one of the weak points of the servuction model as Michael Lipsky (Lipsky, in Jeannot & Joseph, 1995) pointed out, insofar as they are in the field and in contact with the public. From this standpoint, it seems to us that professional dynamics allow for a conceptual framework integrating the various elements that contribute to structuring servuction. For middle management, which is often most at loss when faced with the inevitable disruption between strategic formulation and subjective activity, it is a useful tool that guarantees some degree of continuity. Professional dynamics seem to propose an effective compromise between an often excessive prescription (this recalls quality approaches, which precisely aim at “professionalizing” contact staff) and an irreducible peculiarity of service relationships.

5. Conclusion

To conclude, we would like to get back to the switch that occurs whenever one tries to move from strategy to operations. The gap is sometimes wide between the service we intend to provide and think of as managers or economists and the service we actually provide, whether automated or relational. And it seems that disruptions are on the increase whether dealing with hierarchy (management and staff), academic subjects (essentially sociology and ergonomics on the service relationship side), conceptual objects (the activity or production unit), customer interface (face to face meetings or surveys)...

It appears that service is an object that splits on all sides: this is what makes the study on its operational implementation so necessary and interesting. The study on what can provide elements of continuity, shortcuts to action, is therefore relevant. This is how we would like to position the approach by professional dynamics.

This approach is still far from being a full model or a methodology; at any rate it is not operational. Yet, we wanted to account for it by highlighting its explicative and constructive scope. We feel one of its benefits lies in its interest for practitioners. So far, those with whom we have had the opportunity to exchange at RATP appreciated its communication potential and its ability to explain and account for. We interpret it as a first, positive signal.

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